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EDUCATIONAL ELEPHANTIASIS

BY BURGESS JOHNSON

STRIVING for mere bulk is a national pastime that we like to think we have outgrown. Even a citizen of Chicago hesitates nowadays and glances furtively about before he taps his vis-à-vis impressively upon the waistcoat button and says, "Chicago has the longest street in the world. More cattle are slaughtered in our city in one week than die in a decade in Cathay." This type of confidence was once a cause of widespread complaint against the average Chicagoan, until he outgrew it. Chicago had begun to develop in ways other than physical. Later on, the center of superlatives moved to St. Louis, and then to Kansas City. At present writing it is located, we believe, in the geographical center of San Francisco Bay, with a strong pull to the southward from Los Angeles, which promises soon to draw it away altogether.

We are willing to admit that in Dickens' day Americans were constantly bragging of mere size. Yet this, oddly enough, did not necessarily prove us braggarts at heart; rather was it a superficiality, a shell that covered souls sensitively conscious of shortcomings. In the crudest 'fifties any average American recognized that there were great national deficiencies in the realm of culture. He felt that they must be at once apparent to a visitor from the more highly refined civilizations of Europe, and he hastened, like a cuttlefish, to throw out a smoke-screen of superlatives, to protect the national reputation from attack.

That day has passed. American art and letters, and other refinements of civilization, have been superimposed upon the sturdy physical structure that was once our only and our true boast. Nowadays we address the visiting foreigner even in deprecatory terms, confident that he will find here without our guidance qualities of many sorts comparable to those of his own native land.

This is true of the country as a whole. The center of braggadocio has moved so far west that it should rightfully have disappeared long ago into the Pacific, and be now reappearing among the oriental islands. But from time to time we are made aware by a newspaper clipping or a bit of conversation that the Boast of Bulk is still voiced in some retarded section of our country as a proof of final attainment. Does it at last prove the true braggart, or is it still a camouflage, a pose to cover the fact that sensitive souls recognize their community to be deficient in the finer things?

The longest street in the world, the biggest tree, the largest strawberry, are themselves no detriment to a community, unless they actually crowd out justifications for a finer sort of superlative. Even the most spiritually minded must take a sneaking sort of pride in mere size. Jumbo was indeed an admirable elephant. But it would be a serious matter if this admiration for bulk set an entire community upon the wrong track, because of the grotesque notion that quantity proves quality.

Not long ago I had a strange dream. It seemed to me that in the state of Calisota rumor was running like a prairie fire that with a little effort the State university might become the largest seat of higher education in the land. Here was a superlative almost within reach compared to which bulk in trees and fruits and other material things sank into insignificance. For would not bulk in an educational institution prove bulk in mental attainment as well, so that two superlatives could be caught in one trap? So I dreamt that the directorate of the university, backed by loyal sons of the commonwealth, reached out eagerly for students.

It has been frequently noted how easily the mental balance of a sane individual may be lost in the emotion of a crowd—clergymen of the 'fifties defending slavery, scholars in Germany rejoicing over the *Lusitania*. So we can imagine (if my dream were true) how honest and scholarly reasoners, surrounded by popular clamor for bulk, would discover that bulk itself actually served the purposes of scholarship, or at least of education. So it proved in my dream. Scholars in plenty connected with the institution suddenly discovered that education in a democracy must be within immediate reach of all—higher education no less

than lower. It is the duty of a State university, they said, to be available to every boy and girl in the State who has finished high school, and to make itself as easy of attainment as possible. The matter of educational standard may be considered after admission, but first of all it is imperative that all who wish should be admitted to anything! Only thus may the function of the State university be carried out. Others reasoned that if bulk was the one argument that the State legislature could understand, then let the university first acquire numbers, at any cost.

So I dreamt that throughout the State every high school was empowered to certify its graduates for admission to the university without examination, and though a few conscientious high school principals at first required some standard of attainment before granting a certificate, standing alone in such a quixotic position soon proved too great an effort and in time certificates were cheapened equally from one end of the State to the other. Then, glorious news, rumor ran from mouth to mouth that the State university had a larger enrollment than any other institution of its kind in the United States, and loyal citizens leaned back in their chairs and beamed with satisfaction over this final proof of their beloved State's pre-eminence, now at last in the field of mental attainment.

Let us be grateful if all this was but a dream! But it might be interesting to consider what would happen to a university attempting to digest such a mortal gorge. In the first place, the usual percentage of students attending the university for no reasons other than social would be greatly increased. Boys and girls with no educational aim whatever would tend to lower the standards of those classrooms which largely received their patronage. Moreover, a State university, dependent upon legislative action for funds, could not respond at once to demands for more instruction. Budgets are fixed for a certain time ahead. A thousand students selecting a course in Economics might find salaried instructors sufficient only for five hundred students. Every possible stretching of the exchequer by the authorities could not provide fit men and women to meet this need during the current year, and students would find themselves under fellow students of honor grade, rather than receiving the benefit of mature instruction. A hundred students, it is safe to guess, might find themselves in a "Spoken

French " classroom attempting to master French conversation by a fifty-minute association three times a week with one French expert. Students of weaker moral resistance might find themselves over-tempted to plan prolonged absences from classrooms unbeknown to the instructor. The same type of students might the more easily substitute for one another. Such crimes have been known. I recall now that in my dream there was an instance of a student receiving a high mark in a course that he had not attended at all, and two freshmen electing Sanskrit under the vague impression that it was a science, perhaps having something to do with a sand-box, but content to know that it came at an hour which fitted in with their social engagements.

In other words, such an educational structure might collapse of its own weight. Those earnest apologists for no sifting process at entrance would discover that because of resultant circumstances the establishment of a standard among these hordes after entrance was enormously difficult, and such a standard as we should like to have maintained by our American universities quite impossible.

This was indeed a gloomy dream. I make no defense for it other than to claim that it presents a picture of something which might occur, here or there in our broad land. Assume that such a case of educational elephantiasis were to develop. What, then, is the cure? Surely a vast number of American boys and girls brought together in the name of higher education, in an environment adapted to its pursuit, is an inspiring thought, even though a foolish striving for mere bulk aided their assemblage. Perhaps the establishment of old educational standards among them would be impossible. Then, perhaps, in such an institution it would be better to face that fact and establish new ones.

Is a little education for everybody better than a great deal of education for a few? Such a question is not a fair one. The two things are not mutually exclusive. Surely there is an aristocracy of education that will exist, whatever powers arise to crush it, and however for a time they may succeed. And it is doubtful whether any public can lift itself by its boot-straps. Yet—a little more education for everybody!—that must be worth while. If a great State university might arise which would frankly admit such to be its whole purpose, and not claim for its baccalaureate degree a parity with the degree awarded by educational

machines operated in a different fashion, justification for its existence might well be acknowledged by the entire fraternity of scholars.

Some time ago, an eastern university professor stated that in his opinion the day of great educational segregation was at hand. The accumulation of wealth and power at these centers would make it impossible for small colleges to continue and to justify their own existence. Yet within a year of that statement, progressive administrators in more than one great institution were discussing the advantages of some sort of unscrambling operation, and the establishment of many distinct small colleges of liberal arts, under a system similar to that of English universities. Some of these administrators are now for reaching out and gathering under their wings all detached small colleges in the State. Whether or not the motive is wholly altruistic I cannot say. The fact that all these would be under the control of one centralized authority would give satisfaction to the professor whose opinion I have just quoted.

A few years ago I attended a banquet to celebrate a new development in paper bag cookery. After a delicious meal, various speakers arose to sing its praises, among them Mr. Gelett Burgess. In the course of his remarks he praised the dinner, expressed his approval of the method, but suggested that there were one or two obvious disadvantages to the little bags which had appeared upon our plates. In the first place, they were difficult to handle. He suggested that in the future various improvements upon the idea might appear. The bags, for greater convenience, would be made of some rigid material; then, because of the difficulty of entering them, one side would be left open; then eventually, for convenience of manipulation, some inventive genius would attach a handle, and he could prophetically see, in the far distant future, the gradual evolving of the saucepan.

A most interesting phenomenon in our American world of education is the occasional seismic disturbance, with its resultant ripple upon the waters, when the president of some large university rediscovers the small college.

Some time ago, Amherst College, which proposes to limit its numbers to six hundred students, announced a 50 per cent increase in faculty salaries that would enable it to compete with the largest universities when seeking

teachers, so far as the financial appeal is concerned. It also will offer to every professor of science a private laboratory for research, with assistants to aid in the caring for apparatus, and others to aid with instruction. In this particular small college there is at present one teacher to every ten students. Moreover, 84 per cent of the faculty are of professorial rank. These facts, interpreted, amount to just this: That students are permitted to come into direct relationship with the best teachers of the institution, and the college is able to secure men of the best sort. In contrast to this, some of the largest universities in the country offer to their under-graduates less than one teacher to every twenty students, and a faculty with less than 57 per cent of professorial rank. There are great universities with an even larger percentage of new-fledged instructors, providing instruction for young men nearly as old as themselves.

No wonder that great universities seek to affiliate with the small colleges of their neighborhood! Let us hope that the college will decline with thanks. The best possible antidote so far discovered for the germ of educational elephantiasis is the small college.

BURGES JOHNSON.